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"Crowns for the Valiant"

By

George A. Birmingham

(Canon Hannay)

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Printed by

The Commission for Relief in Belgium

71 Broadway, New York

From Reserve

August 7, 1917

"Crowns for the Valiant"

GEORGE A. BIRMINGHAM

(Canon Hannay)

IT was midday and I found myself in Wall Street. I say found myself deliberately, for I had wandered and been lost, as I always am lost when I venture into that part of the city. But I recognized Wall Street, and knew that I was found again. Right opposite me was Trinity Church, an unmistakable building occupying a site second in suggestiveness only to that of St. Paul's Cathedral. In the case of the London church the cross is held high over the turmoil of the busiest thoroughfares. Here Trinity stands right across the top of the street whose name suggests finance to all the world. God and Mammon! The bells of Trinity were ringing out a tune which sounded clear above the noise of voices and the clattering of footsteps on the pavement. It was the ancient tune of a very ancient Latin hymn, and it struck me while I listened to it as singularly inappropriate. I remembered the English translation:

"Oh, what the joy and the gladness must be
Of those endless Sabbaths the blessed ones see.
Crowns for the valiant, for weary ones rest."

And so forth. What has the tune, redolent of gothic cloisters; what have the words, echoes of monastic aspirations; what have they to do with Wall Street? They belong to the days which were before men learned to organize the world and all that is in it,

before the fascinating sport of money-making had been invented.

I was perplexed and troubled as I entered a huge building which dwarfed the church beside it, symbol as it seemed of the way in which the temples of commerce have outgrown in importance temples of God. I swung upwards in an elevator far higher than ever incense clouds rose anywhere. I reached at last a twentieth floor.

Here, in a small office, I met two men, who spoke to me. Very patiently, for I am stupid beyond words in such matters. They explained to me the details of a vastly complicated business. They set before me a map of the Atlantic Ocean, with the American seaboard on the west of it and the European on the east. Right across the map stood two rows of pins with colored heads, red or blue. In the European ports, in Falmouth, and especially in Rotterdam, were little groups of white-headed pins. In the American ports were more pins, black-headed. Each pin was a ship. Loading here, a black pin stood for her. Sailing east, a blue pin, moved every day, marked her progress. Sailing west in ballast, she became a red pin. In port, unloading, she was white. I did not count the ships, but there was a very large number of them. On the walls of the room were huge blackboards, and on them, written in chalk, the names of ships, their tonnage, the port and date of their departure, the nature of their cargo. The names were various, the dates and ports changed. The cargo was always the same—Food.

In England to-day, in France and Germany too, I suppose, many men keep maps and mark them with lines and groves of colored pins. We look at these maps and are reminded, as they move from place to place, that here or there victories have been won, and the War Gods have claimed fresh victims. This map in a New York office showed the progress of the spirit of another god. The ships marched to save, not to conquer. If the long procession of these ships ceases, if the ocean on this map is left bare of pins, seven million people, victims, not makers, of war, will starve. The imagination boggles at the attempt to realize so desperate a thing. Yet it is literally true. Between this vast number of Belgian people and starvation there is nothing but this continuous procession of ships. There is no other food except what these ships bring, and though a man had the gold that Midas made he could not buy what would keep life in him.

I was shown another map, and then another. These were of North America. On the one were more pins, stuck in, haphazard as it seemed, in various places. Each represented a collecting station where the food which the ships carried was gathered. On the other map were painted squares and oblongs, red, blue, mauve, and on these were figures, meaningless to me, but which told the instructed reader what the freight rates are from every region to the seacoast. The complexity of the business left me gasping. Men are starving somewhere in the world. Buy food and send it to them. The thing seems simple enough.

But when there are seven million people starving and a whole continent must be ransacked to find them food, then all the intricacies of railroad systems must be mastered, all the possibilities of varying rates weighed and considered.

Buy food and send it to the starving. It sounds a simple thing to do, but when there are seven million people starving it is necessary to buy huge quantities of food. The buyer who steps in to buy thousands of tons of wheat cannot buy as a woman might buy six loaves of bread. His action affects the market price, raises it so that not only he, but every man and woman in the civilized world will be affected by the rise. It is not an easy thing to buy for seven millions of people. The business, if it is not to lead to disaster, must be gone about very skilfully, very cautiously, by men who possess a hard-won knowledge of the temper of one of the most capricious markets in the world.

There is the political situation to be taken into account, and the governments of warring countries to be placated. The seas are strewn with mines, submarines prowl through the depths of them. Warships rush across them. In the air are flying vessels of destruction. Each warring nation, being desperately in earnest, is jealous and suspicious. Some of them cannot, some will not, feed these starving Belgians. The duty is laid upon America, because America alone both can and will. The Commission for Relief in Belgium must enter the field of diplomacy and persuade the great powers to let its ships

pass freely, to recognize its flag at least as a secure protection.

The immense difficulty of this business of feeding the starving Belgians began to grow plain to me. I realized that the men who proposed this Commission of Relief are something more than slipshod administrators of petty charities. They are engaged in a work which demands for its proper execution the qualities by which great affairs are carried on and great fortunes made—the organizing capacity of the banker, the patient wisdom of the statesman, the keen foresight of the merchant. I saw that the equipment of the service of Mammon might be—there before my eyes actually had been—taken over and used in another service for wholly unselfish ends. The building in which I sat overtopped the church beside it. But the spirit of religion had taken possession, and was using for altruistic ends the very faculties which the world regarded as dedicated to its meaner service.

But I was by no means at the end of this wonderful story of business efficiency turned to the service of suffering humanity. I had heard of the buying, the collecting, the carriage of the food, of the political difficulties which were overcome. I had still to hear about the distribution. Here, at last, I came upon a subject of which I knew something beforehand. It has been my lot to take part more than once in organized attempts to feed people in times of dearth. I know the sort of difficulties by which such efforts are beset. There are all sorts of evil

chances which befall well-intentioned administrators of charitable funds. There may be overlapping and waste. There may be leakage through dishonesty and theft. There may be a degrading sense of dependence forced upon self-respecting men. I do not believe that any of these evils are occurring in Belgium.

Certain members of the Commission, American citizens in Belgium, have devised an amazingly simple and yet effective system by which those of the Belgians who are in a position to pay for their food are able to do so and endure no stigma of pauperism. In some provinces it is possible to buy a book of coupons, like a railroad mileage book, and these can be exchanged at a baker's for a supply of bread sufficient for the household. Elsewhere a kind of bread bonds are sold. To the bakers sufficient flour is issued for the making of bread to meet the bonds or coupons issued. Drastic measures have been taken to punish bakers who adulterate or misuse their flour. The Belgians themselves are co-operating with fine devotion. Banks—French, English and Belgian—are advancing money to individuals against securities which are not now, and perhaps never will be, realizable They are making loans to business houses which wish to continue paying at least part of the wages of their employees. This money is exchanged for food coupons or bonds, and rations are served out alike to those who pay and those who cannot. Soup kitchens are established for the absolutely destitute, and such vegetables as can be ob-

gained are given to them. The whole business of distribution is organized down to the minutest detail and worked by local committees under the direct control of members of the Commission. The Committee in London watches over and negotiates the difficulties which arise with the various governments.

Where does the money come from? The Belgians —I repeat this—are paying willingly so far as they have power to pay. The English Government gave at the outset $500,000. Certain newspapers have collected and handed over large sums. Every State in the Union has contributed through local committees. Canada has given generously. Italy and Spain have given. But the giving must go on. The war continues. While it continues, and for at least six months afterwards, this elementary duty of feeding the starving must be done. I suppose that we may call the generosity which has been shown so far wonderful. I feel confident that the generosity of the time ahead of us will be wonderful too. But I think that the most wonderful thing of all is the ability placed at the service of charity by the members of the Commission. It is this, at all events, which has impressed me beyond my power of telling. Giving, thank God, is as common as light or love. America has shown often enough that her people know how to give, money, or what money will buy. Have we any other example of such a prodigal sacrifice of time and energy, such a consecration of brains?

When I left the office the bells of Trinity Church had ceased ringing, but the tune they played at noon

repeated itself within me—"Crowns for the Valiant." I suppose the church men of those old days meant more than mere physical courage when they spoke of valiantness. They meant capacity for doing things used steadfastly for some noble end. So may we, interpreting their word in our modern way, sound out their tune over the Babel of Wall Street; since modern commerce and finance also produce these men of effective strength of brain and will who use their powers for the good of the weak and helpless.

The Commission for Relief in Belgium

71 Broadway, New York

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By

The Commission for Relief in Belgium

Official Clearing House for All Belgium Relief

We, as Americans, are enlisted for the war to save seven million men, women and children. It is the greatest commissary undertaking in the history of the world, and in the lexicon of America there is no such word as fail.

We Need Food Supplies as Well as Cash

Is there a committee for Belgium relief in your community?

If there is none, start one under our official sanction.

Are You Helping? If Not, Send in Your Name Now!

Make out your check or money order, or send cash either to the state committee sanctioned by this Commission or to the New York Headquarters:

The Commission for Relief in Belgium

71 Broadway, New York City, N. Y

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